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Popular priest leaving Merced parish

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Staff Writer

When he's saying Mass or teaching confirmation classes, they call him "Father Craig." When he's speaking in a high school classroom or coaching the frosh-soph swimming team, he's "padre."

The Rev. Craig Harrison, 29, a priest at Our Lady of Mercy Church, will be leaving for Bakersfield at the end of the month and that's leaving a lot of Mercedians saddened.

Harrison was not only a popular priest among his congregation, he was visible in community affairs, sitting on various boards and speaking at high schools. "I'm not looking forward to leaving. I love this kind of community," said Harrison. "It's the kind of place I'd like to settle in."

Harrison will be going back to his original home and church and the principle that a prophet is without honor in his own country mildly concerns him.

"I was a typical kid. I was active in athletics and was student body president. When I graduated, I wanted to pursue a career in business."

Harrison went through the University of California, Los Angeles a Phi Kappa Psi and majored in economics. In 1980, he graduated and went to work for a successful advertising agency.

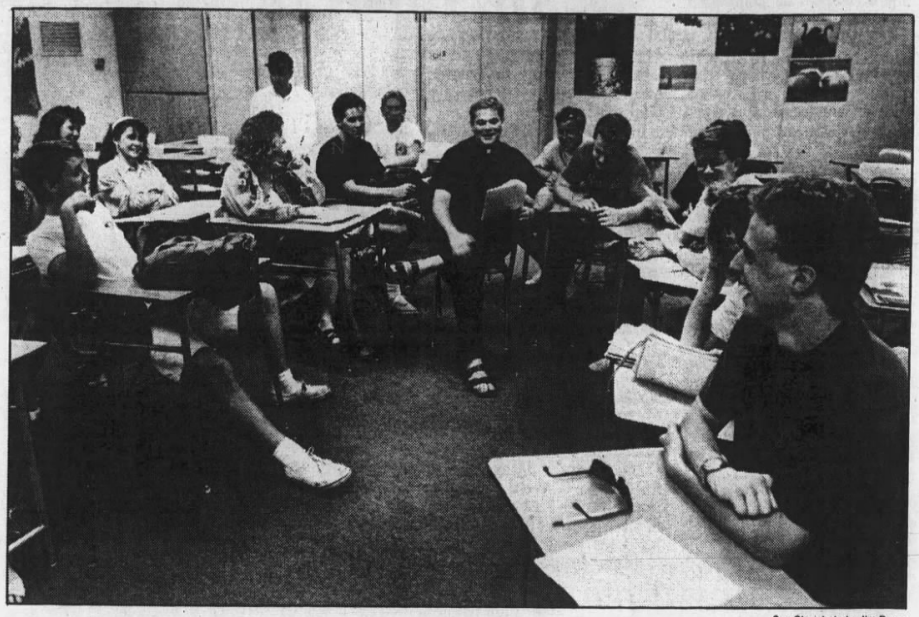
"But within seven or eight months, I started looking at life differently. I was working, making good money, had everything I wanted, but it wasn't fulfilling the needs I had. There was no contentment in my life."

He quit his job and moved back to Bakersfield where he worked as a junior high school teacher. "I was a people person and the school started opening me up to a whole new world. In business it was cut-throat."

Harrison started working with physically and sexually abused children and at-risk children for the Bakersfield Probation Department. "I didn't realize I had been sheltered by the realities of the world. I wanted to be at-roots with people, close in the midst of their hurts. My vocation was always in the material world and I was distracted."

After several months of hard thinking, Harrison decided to enter St. John Theologate in Camarillo and study to be a priest, much to the surprise of his family.

"It was kind of a test. I figured I'd hate it and come back after the first year and release myself from feeling like I should pursue the priesthood. But when I got there, I knew this was where I belonged," said Harrison.



Sun-Star photo by Jim Byous

The Rev. Craig Harrison shares a lax moment with a Merced High School family living class.

Seminary settled the question for Harrison although it was admittedly hard to leave the material world behind and the hope of marriage.

Harrison spent the next five years studying and completing his field education which included working in an AIDS hospital, a skid row house and a clinic for abused children in Santa Barbara.

When Harrison wasn't involved in outreach, he was living the quiet, contemplative life which included a routine of in-depth Bible study and prayer.

"It was a very peaceful, reflective time. It helped me understand my spirituality. I felt I had found what I could do for the rest of my life. Though it was a real strain on my family because they thought I was throwing away everything, they saw I was very happy and accepted my changes," said Harrison.

After completing his theological education, Harrison was assigned to the Merced church in 1987. During the last two years, Harrison has performed the duties of a priest and been active in the community.

He served on the Merced High School Health Task Force which dealt with moral values and family living, and he served on the Merced AIDS Support Team.

He was a director for Hospice of Merced and Mariposa Counties and also A Woman's Place, a shelter for battered women and children.

Harrison is founder of the Maya House, a home for young at-risk men. The name of the home was recently changed to Father Craig's Home for Young Adults by the board of directors. Rich Brown of Merced will take over as supervisor for the home.

"It's also been a honor to coach and speak at the high school campus. It's rare when public schools open their doors to clergy like Merced has for me."

Harrison's latest confirmation class had a record of more than 75 students. "There's usually about 20. I'm impressed with the kids in Merced. Many of them really want to make a difference in the this community.

Harrison also is a foster parent. When he was teaching in Bakersfield, he adopted Ray Keenan, then 11. Keenan lived in a boys' home near the seminary Harrison attended and attended Merced College when Harrison moved here. Keenan recently entered the service.

One memorable moment for Harrison was when he took Wally Hughes, a Merced College student who was paralyzed from the waist down, to a place of divine healing in Lourdes, France. Harrison was involved in praying for him. "He is now in a walker and attends a special clinic."

Harrison's basic philosophy behind his work with youth "is affirming that they're good, lovable and worth something. They're good because God created them. I'll freely admit there's been successes and failures.

"Seeing the best in people can be a curse, too. Sometimes I've been hurt but I'm still an optimist. It's like when Mary Magdalene came to Jesus. The others were calling her a waste but He saw a fabulous human being. I never listen to people when they call others a waste."

Ministry to AIDS victims

FRESNO (MNS) — Evangelicals for Social Action, an organization backed by more than 60 churches in the San Joaquin Valley, has begun a program to help people who have AIDS. And some Fresno churches are holding workshops to define the issue and to decide what community action should be taken.

Bud Searcy, acting director of the Christian AIDS Network for Evangelicals for Social Action, said the newly-formed organization will educate people about the disease and show how Christian faith can develop practical programs for the care and support of people diagnosed with AIDS.

"We try to follow the mandate of Jesus Christ," Searcy said. "We try to meet the needs of people by taking care of the homeless, feeding the hungry or helping people with AIDS. It's not enough to just proclaim the good news."

He said Evangelicals for Social Action includes a network of Christian doctors, nurses and counselors and offers special training for people who want to care for those suffering from AIDS.

Churches supported abortion

SACRAMENTO (MNS) — The California Council of Churches announced Wednesday it has gone on record supporting state abortion funding for women who cannot afford health care or other medical bills.

In a letter addressed to members of the state Legislature's budget committees, the council said "abortion is a religious issue — not a political one.

"We disagree with the concept that the government can by force of law impose the religious viewpoint of one church on all other churches or on non-church people," the letter said.

Denominations represented at the group's Sacramento meeting included the Presbyterian Church, United Church of Christ, Episcopal Diocese of California, American Baptist Church and Evangelical Lutheran Church.

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